

Selecting, Organizing, and Presenting Reading Materials by Genre

By Marsha Syrquin

In this article, the term genre refers to any classification scheme of reading materials based on text type. Texts may be divided by type of publication (newspapers, news magazines, journals, and books) with a further breakdown within each unit; or they may be divided by expository type, (essays, research reports, theoretical articles, etc.). Dividing reading materials by text type provides a coherent structural bases for teaching both advanced EFL and ESP courses.

The underlying rationale for using a genre-based approach is two fold. First, specific skills, such as identifying the main idea of a paragraph or scanning, will vary with different texts types. Second, identifying and focusing on the difficulties inherent in particular types of texts will help students improve their reading comprehension.

English for Law Students

Several years ago in preparation for teaching an ESP course for law students at Bar Ilan University, Israel, I collected a large number of legal texts and reviewed the collections of readings used in the ESP courses for law students at the other Israeli universities. While trying to decide how to organize the material, I was also grappling with other questions regarding the planning of the course. Should I deal separately with lexis, syntax, paragraph structure, and global comprehension or use some kind of integrated approach? How could I heighten the students' interest level and stimulate their intellectual curiosity? And finally, what was I ultimately trying to achieve?

The key question is really the last one and it took me some time to answer. First, it entailed getting to know the specific student population better. Law students in Israel are unusually bright and have excellent reading skills in Hebrew. In addition, by the time they reach the university, they have already studied English for a good number of years and have reached a fairly high level of proficiency in reading English. Yet, when assigned texts in English for their law courses, many students resort to translations, related texts in Hebrew, or class notes.

But getting to know the students was only part of the picture. I also had to examine a sampling of the texts they are expected to read. I noticed that some of the law texts follow patterns similar to texts in other disciplines. For example, chapters from introductory books on law are in many respects similar to chapters from introductory books on economics or psychology. They define basic concepts and terms and draw on theoretical examples to explain them. The organizational structure is usually clear, the syntax not overly complex and the lexis relatively limited. But some of the law texts are unique. For example, Supreme Court decisions and law reports have no parallels in other academic disciplines.

I began to view my role as a guide: to organize the texts into types, to identify and explain the central characteristics of each type, and to locate and focus on the difficulties inherent in a particular type of text. For example, decisions of the Queen's Bench frequently contain a large number of very long, complex sentences, and the challenge to the reader is to navigate the avalanche of words to get to the basic arguments. By guiding the students through a few selected sentences, what initially appears as an almost incomprehensible maze may very well turn out to contain a relatively simple line of reasoning.

To return to the question of what I am ultimately trying to achieve--I am trying to remove a block to reading in English by guiding students through representative texts and by using exercises which are aimed at overcoming specific difficulties. Hopefully, the student, having been *guided* through one or more *representative* texts, will be able to transfer the skills acquired to other texts of the same kind. In addition, using a genre-based approach whets the students' intellectual appetite and heightens their interest because it is an appropriate approach for their academic level; and it is relevant to their academic needs.

English for Economics Students

I am now in the process of planning an ESP course for economics students, and I am preparing a collection of readings and exercises for the course. Having had experience in editing manuscripts for economics journals, I am initially in a better position than I was when planning the ESP course for law students. But more important, I feel I know what I'm trying to do and how to do it.

To broaden and enlarge lexis, I select texts from a wide range of fields including environmental economics, international trade, and comparative economics. At the same time, I select different expository types of texts including essays, chapters from introductory textbooks, and theoretical or empirical journal articles. One text, from the field of environmental economics, will be used as an illustration of a journal essay. Another, from the field of international trade, will be used as an illustration of a theoretical journal article.

Two other criteria guide my selection. First, since the majority of students will be in their first year of studies, I select texts closely related to key elements taught in second-and third-year courses. Second, when possible I select texts which carry a punch. One text discusses the pitfalls of free trade, a somewhat unorthodox position.

A short introductory comment regarding genre will precede each text and three exercises follow. The first will be devoted to lexis focusing on key terms or phrases based on the subject matter and/or text type.

The second exercise will be devoted to a characteristic sentence structure in the text. For example, since assumption/conclusion sentences are central to understanding the above-mentioned text, they will be the focus of that activity.

The third will be devoted to either a significant aspect of textual presentation or organization. If examples are used not only to illustrate a point but to constitute support for a position, an

exercise will be devoted to this aspect. If cause-and-effect reasoning is central, an exercise will be devoted to this aspect.

Conclusion

We do not read different sections of a newspaper in the same way. Experience has taught us that comic strips are not the same as gossip columns, and gossip columns are not the same as editorials. Likewise, essays are not the same as academic journal articles, and chapters from introductory textbooks are not the same as research reports. Since one of our primary aims as university teachers of English is to prepare students to read a variety of academic texts on their own, we must help them get through their initial experiences. Hopefully, these experiences will lead to more productive reading, and will function as an incentive for students to read texts that they might otherwise have avoided.

Marsha Syrquin teaches English at Bar Ilan University and the College for Legal Studies. She is interested in testing, ESP, and advanced level reading.